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ABSTRACT

Adolescents' best friendships are often believed to contribute to their psychosocial adjustment. This study examined the relationship between students' adjustment to school and the positive features, negative features, and frequency of interaction in their friendships. Participating were 106 students, 90 percent of whom were white, in a small midwestern school district. Subjects were assessed in seventh grade and again 2 years later. Assessments were comprised of interviews with the students to obtain information on friendship features and classroom involvement; Harter's Self-Perception Profile completed by the students to obtain information on their perceptions of scholastic competence, social acceptance, behavior, and global self-worth; and teacher ratings on involvement and disruptive behaviors. The findings indicated that students were less involved in school, valued school less, and had lower grades in ninth grade than in seventh grade. Frequent interaction with friends in seventh grade predicted an increase over time in perceived social acceptance, a decrease in perceived scholastic competence, and an increase in teacher reports of disruptiveness between seventh and ninth grade. (KB)

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Friendship Features and Adolescents' School Adjustment

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ABSTRACT

To examine the relationship between students' adjustment to school and the positive features, negative features, and frequency of interaction in their friendships, 106 7th students were assessed in 7th grade and then in 9th grade. Students were less involved in school, valued school less, and had lower grades in 9th grade than when in 7th grade. They also became more disruptive. Friendship features were associated with more aspects of school adjustment in 7th than in 9th grade. Frequent interaction with friends at 7th grade predicted an increase over time in perceived social acceptance, a decrease in perceived scholastic competence, and an increase in teacher reports of disruptiveness between 7th grade and 9th grade. The results suggest that the effects of friendship features may change with age.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescents' best friendships are often believed to contribute to their psychosocial adjustment (e.g., Youniss, 1980; Berndt, in press). Consistent with such hypotheses, studies have reported significant correlations between school adjustment and the positive and negative features of adolescents' friendship. For example, Berndt and Keefe (1995) found that 7th and 8th graders whose friendships had more positive features were higher in classroom involvement, perceived their conduct as better, perceived higher social acceptance by their peers, and had higher general self-esteem than students with less positive friendships. Those students whose friendships had more negative features reported less involvement and more disruptive behavior in school, poorer self-perceptions of behavior conduct, and lower general self-esteem. Evidence that friendship features can predict changes in school adjustment over time, however, has been more equivocal.

In addition, few previous studies have included measure of the frequency of interaction between students and their friends. Also, there has been little research concerning whether the effects of friendship features vary with age. Buhrmester (1990) reported that students' reports on the intimacy of their friendships were more strongly related to their social competence and psychological adjustment at 13-16 years of age than at 10-13 years of age. In the current study, we assessed the positive and negative features of students' friendships, and the frequency of interaction between adolescents and their friends. Also, participants were followed from 7th grade to 9 grade. This design allowed us to examine possible age changes in the relationship between friendship features and various aspects of school adjustment, and to see whether friendship features at an earlier time were associated with changes in school adjustment over time.

METHOD

Participants

A total of 106 students (79 girls and 27 boys) participated in the study when they were seventh graders (Time 1), and again when they were ninth graders (Time 2). The mean age of the participants was 13 years and 2 months at Time 1. The study was conducted in the only junior high school and senior high school in a small school district in the Midwest. More than 90% of the students participating were White.

Procedures

Friendship Features

In an interview at Time 1, students first named up to three best friends and then responded to a standard series of questions about the quality of those best friendships. The positive features of students' friendship were assessed with items about prosocial behavior, intimacy, loyalty, and emotional support. The negative features of their friendships were assessed with items on conflict and rivalry. Finally, other items assessed the frequency of interaction between students and their friends. The alpha coefficients for the three measures ranged from .71 to .88. At Time 2, students responded to the same questions about the quality of their friendships with their three closest friends, but this time in a group-administered questionnaire. At Time 2, alpha coefficients for the three composite measures were .71 to .83.

School Adjustment

At both times, the students reported on their positive involvement in classroom activities by answering questions such as "How often do you take part in classroom discussions?" They also reported how much they valued their schooling by answering questions such as "How valuable do you think your education will be in getting the job you want?" Two teachers rated students on their involvement and disruptive behaviors in the classroom. Finally Harter's (1985) Self-Perception Profile was used to assess students' perceptions of their scholastic competence, social acceptance, behavioral conduct, and global self-worth.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Changes in School Adjustment

As Table 1 shows, students became less oriented toward school and decreased in their level of academic achievement as they moved from 7th grade to 9th grade. Seventh graders were more involved in school, valued school more, were less disruptive, and had higher grades than 9th graders. These results are consistent with previous research (e.g., Eccles, Midgley, & Adler, 1984). In addition, girls had lower scores on general self-worth than boys did, but at the same time they valued school more and were less disruptive than boys.

Relationships between Friendship Features and School Adjustment

Table 2 shows the correlations of friendship features with adjustment at Time 1 and Time 2. At Time 1, students who described their friendships more positively also had better adjustment to school in general: They valued school more and had greater perceived scholastic competence, social acceptance, behavioral conduct, and general self-worth. However, at Time 2, students' positive friendship features were related only to perceived social acceptance. At Time 1, students who reported more negative features of friendship had generally poorer adjustment to school: they reported less involvement in school, valued school less, and perceived their social acceptance and behavioral conduct as poorer. At Time 2, students' negative friendship features were only related to the score on behavioral conduct. At Time 1, students who had more frequent interactions with their friends perceived themselves as higher in scholastic competence and social acceptance. By contrast, at Time 2 interaction frequency was positively related to disruption in class and to perceived social acceptance. Overall, it seems that while friendship features could be considered as indicators of general school adjustment in 7th grade, by 9th grade positive features were linked only to social acceptance and negative features were linked only to misconduct and disruption.

The reasons for such a change in unclear. The shifting from interview measures to questionnaire measures of friendship features may partly be the reason. However, while some correlations between

friendship features and school adjustment dropped to nonsignificance, others actually increased in their magnitude (see Table 2). This fact supports the interpretation that the change is unlikely to be simply a methodological artifact. On the other hand, several factors may lead to the pattern of results observed in the current study. Students may begin to differentiate more clearly between the academic aspect of school adjustment (e.g., involvement, school values, and behavioral conduct) and the social aspect of school adjustment as they move to 9th grade. This increasing differentiation in perception in turn results in self-reports of friendship features being no longer an indicator of self-reports of general school adjustment. Also, the academic aspect of school adjustment might have become less significant in students' social life in 9th grade than it was in 7th grade.

Friendship Features and Changes in School Adjustment

Multiple regression analyses were done to examine the degree to which measures of friendship at Time 1 predicted changes in adjustment over time. The results showed that frequent interaction with friends at Time 1 predicted an increase in social acceptance (beta = .22, $p < .01$, $\Delta R^2 = .05$), a decrease in perceptions of scholastic competence (beta = -.15, $p < .05$, $\Delta R^2 = .02$), and an increase in teacher reports of disruptiveness (beta = .17, $p < .05$, $\Delta R^2 = .03$). These results imply that devoting more time to socializing and interacting with friends may have positive consequences for students' social status, but at the same time negative consequences for their school adjustment. This pattern of results should not be surprising in view of the decrease in school orientation from 7th to 9th grade. That is, more frequent interactions with friends may help reinforce the apparent trend of decrease in school orientation among adolescents at this age. Neither positive nor negative friendship features predicted significant changes in school adjustment, consistent with some previous studies (see Berndt, in press). The lack of significant predictions may be the result of relatively high continuity in individual differences in school adjustment. Also, effects of friendship features may vary depending on the identities of the child's friends (Berndt, in press).

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CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the relations between friendship features and school adjustment became weaker or more differentiated between seventh and ninth grade. Although positive and negative friendship features were unrelated to changes in adjustment across grades, frequent interactions with friends were related to declines in school adjustment. More research is needed to see whether the effects of friendship features on adolescents' adjustment change with age.

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Table 1

Changes in Students' School Adjustment from 7th Grade to 9th Grade

	Time 1		Time 2	
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
School Involvement (self)[a]				
M	3.74	3.56	3.26	3.21
SD	(.57)	(.69)	(.62)	(.60)
School Involvement (teacher)[a]				
M	3.62	3.59	3.22	3.06
SD	(.52)	(.62)	(.59)	(.54)
School Value [a,b]				
M	4.04	3.69	3.73	3.42
SD	(.42)	(.60)	(.55)	(.72)
Disruptive Behavior (teacher) [a,b]				
M	1.41	1.86	1.74	2.30
SD	(.45)	(.67)	(.59)	(.89)
Grades [a]				
M	6.85	6.56	6.13	6.00
SD	(2.82)	(2.72)	(3.17)	(3.16)
Scholastic Competence				
M	2.85	3.02	2.71	2.99
SD	(.64)	(.65)	(.68)	(.65)
Social acceptance				
M	3.14	3.04	3.13	3.01
SD	(.60)	(.61)	(.68)	(.54)
Conduct				
M	3.25	2.98	3.03	3.06
SD	(.49)	(.67)	(.56)	(.59)
General Self-worth [b]				
M	3.10	3.28	2.90	3.23
SD	(.61)	(.55)	(.65)	(.57)

[a]significant differences between Times 1 and 2 ($p < .05$).
[b]significant sex differences ($p < .05$).

Table 2

Correlations of Students' Adjustment to School with the Features of Their Friendships

	Positive Features		Negative Features		Interaction Frequency	
Self-reports	Time 1	Time 2	Time 1	Time 2	Time 1	Time 2
Involvement	.08	.10	-.21*	-.02	.00	.04
School value	.24*	.17	-.21*	-.03	.07	.07
Scholastic competence	.30**	.12	-.19	-.17	.21*	-.03
Social acceptance	.31**	.38***	-.22*	-.09	.22*	.40***
Conduct	.22*	.09	-.22*	-.21*	.07	.06
General self-worth	.24*	.09	-.14	-.16	.16	.09
Teacher-ratings						
Involvement	.12	.06	-.06	-.05	.08	-.17
Disruption	-.07	-.10	.12	.03	-.01	.32**
Grades	.13	.04	-.10	-.12	.02	-.13

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001